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Plotinus on the Reality of the Category of Relation

Charlene Elsby

In the first three tractates of the Sixth Ennead (or, as William Inge refers to them, the “most obscure,” “least attractive,” and “least interesting part of the whole book”¹), Plotinus rejects the Aristotelian categorical system and attempts to replace it with two distinct categorical systems, one each for the intelligible and sensible worlds. Porphyry’s interpretation of the *Categories* as a logical rather than an ontological treatise deflected what initially appeared to be an inevitable clash with Platonic doctrine, but sidestepped Plotinus’s criticisms, which were directed, as Evangeliou notes, “not against the logic but against the ontology that underlies Aristotle’s categorical doctrine, so that it is devastating in its intentions, to say the least.”² According to the doctrine of these tractates, the category of relation factors prominently, both as an example of Plotinus’s Platonic ontology and as the foundational category (besides substance) in his reformulation of categorial doctrine for the sensible realm. After some general remarks on Plotinus’s Platonizing criticism of Aristotle’s *Categories*, and specifically the category of relation, I will show how his Platonic treatment of the category of relation leads him to a definition of reality that excludes several otherwise plausible non-Platonic notions of a real relation. This results in his conclusion asserting the reality of relations being dependent upon the assumption of the existence of a Platonic intelligible realm. Aristotle’s more modest attempt to define relations runs into fewer difficulties when the temporality of productive relations, in particular, are concerned.

Plotinus’s Criticism of Aristotle’s Categories

The title of the first three tractates of the sixth Ennead, “On the Genera of

¹ Ralph William Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus; The Gifford Lectures at St. Andrews, 1917–1918*, 3rd ed. (Toronto: Longmans, Green and Co., 1948), 1:194 and 2:58.

² Christos Evangeliou, “The Ontological Basis of Plotinus’s Criticism of Aristotle’s Theory of Categories” in *The Structure of Being*, ed. R. Baine Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1982), 74.

Being,” already indicates that Plotinus understood the *Categories* fundamentally as an ontological work, a view, which, despite Porphyry’s logical interpretation finds some support in the reappearance of the categories in the *Metaphysics*. It is the nature of this understanding which I now intend to examine.

From a Platonist perspective, Plotinus’s criticism seems rather damning, for Plotinus charges Aristotle with having overlooked an entire level of reality which is supposed to be the more real—that is, the intelligible realm. As Evangeliou points out, “Plotinus follows simply the premises (1) that reality is ontologically divided into two realms, and (2) that Aristotle’s categories do not apply to the higher level of reality.”³ Plotinus, distinguishing between the intellectual and sensible realms, first argues that it is impossible for a categorical system to be applied to both realms, and charges Aristotle with ignoring that which is more real, stating in VI.1.1 that “these thinkers are however not considering the Intellectual realm in their division, which was not intended to cover all the Existents; the Supreme they overlooked.”⁴ This has led some to criticize Plotinus for saying merely that Aristotle is not Platonic enough. As Inge relates, “My own impression is that Plotinus is hampered, as in some other cases, by the Platonic tradition.”⁵ It would seem to the Aristotelian that Plotinus’s criticism of the *Categories* is simply misguided.⁶ That is, the basis of Plotinus’s criticism reduces to a difference of basic assumptions, namely that there is a higher intelligible realm distinct from the sensible realm that encompasses the lower reality of the material world. Responding to the idea that in order for something to exist it must be embodied in the material, Plotinus reiterates his Platonic assumptions, stating in VI.3.7:

If it be urged that other things can have no subsistence without being implanted in Matter, we admit the claim for Sensible things. But though Matter be prior to these, it is not thereby precluded from being posterior to many things—posterior, in fact, to all the beings of the Intellectual sphere. Its existence is but a pale reflection, and less complete than that of the things implanted in it. But our critic might pursue, Matter gives existence to the things

³ Evangeliou, “Plotinus’s Criticism of Aristotle’s Theory of Categories,” 78.

⁴ Plotinus, *The Enneads*, trans. Stephen MacKenna (London: Faber and Faber, 1956), 443–44. (All translations of Plotinus herein are from MacKenna unless otherwise noted.)

⁵ Inge, *The Philosophy of Plotinus*, 192.

⁶ As J.M. Rist states: “It appears to be the opinion of certain polemical interpreters that Plotinus’s whole discussion is misguided—and so it as if looked at solely from an Aristotelian point of view. For the fact is that Plotinus’s critique of both the Aristotelian and the Stoic categories depends upon certain of his own thoroughly Platonic principles” (J.M. Rist, *Plotinus: The Road to Reality* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967], 103).

implanted in it, just as Socrates gives existence to the whiteness implanted in himself? We reply that the higher being gives existence to the lower, the lower to the higher never.⁷

Given Plotinus's distinction between the sensible and the intelligible, there are two possible roads he could take to maintain some kind of categorical theory: he could either attempt to locate a number of categories in both the sensible and the intelligible, or he could maintain that there is no satisfactory way to categorize the two realms, even by analogy. Plotinus opts for the latter, concluding that the Aristotelian categories at best describe the realm of the sensible, while the intelligible requires another distinct set of categories. In the end, Plotinus adopts a Platonic theory of categories for the intelligible realm, taken from the *Sophist*, and reduces to five the number of Aristotelian categories to be employed to describe the sensible realm.⁸ With Plotinus keeping substance (or what appears to be substance, which for Plotinus encompasses matter, form, and the composite), relatives, quantity, quality, and introducing motion (which will serve to replace both action and passion), the other categories (where, when, action, passion, having and situation) are combined and reduced to integrate into his new five-category system for the sensible realm. Despite the appearance that Plotinus is attempting to placate both the Platonists and Aristotelians,⁹ the five-category system for the sensible realm seems in fact to be inspired by Plato. As Evangeliou notes, Plotinus's categories are derived from the distinction between the *kath' hauto* (a distinction relating to a theory of substance) and the *pros allo* (a distinction relating to a theory of relation) found in Plato's *Sophist*.¹⁰

The important point for our purposes is that the categories of quantity and quality, which are prominent in Aristotle's list, have been reduced to relation in at least one of Plotinus's tentative lists. So is every other category except for substance. Although Plotinus did not in the end adopt this twofold division, it is significant that he even suggested it because it serves as an indication of his tendency to raise the category of relation to its old Platonic status.¹¹

⁷ Plotinus, *Enn.* VI.3.7, p. 497.

⁸ Plotinus, *Enn.* VI.3.3, p. 494.

⁹ For a discussion of Plotinus's relative Platonism or Aristotelianism, see John Anton, "Plotinus's Approach to Categorical Theory," in *The Significance of Neoplatonism*, ed. R. Baine Harris (Norfolk: International Society for Neoplatonic Studies, 1976), 83–99.

¹⁰ See Plato, *Sophist* 255c.

¹¹ Christos Evangeliou, "The Plotinian Reduction of Aristotle's Categories," *Ancient Philosophy* 7 (1987): 153.

Indeed, after noting in VI.3.3 that quantity, quality, and motion could possibly be incorporated into the category of relation, Plotinus proceeds to separate them out again on the theory that their existence is not based solely on their being attributes of something existent. Again, one sees in this the Platonic idea that a quality exists prior to its instantiation in a sensible object. A relation, on the other hand, seems for Plotinus dependent on sensibles, as he says in VI.3.21:

Relation has no existence apart from the relation to which it owes its name: the double, strictly so called, takes birth and actuality in juxtaposition with a yard's length, and, inconceivable before, by this very process of being juxtaposed with a correlative acquires the name and exhibits the fact of being double.¹²

We may contrast this definition of relation with a quality, to which Plotinus wants to attribute some absolute existence. He does this by distinguishing beauty itself from the relative beauty between examples, stating in VI.3.11:

Beauty we regard as absolute and as a quality; 'more beautiful' is the relative. Yet even the term 'beautiful' may be attached to something which in a given relation may appear ugly: the beauty of man, for example, is ugliness when compared with that of the gods; 'the most beautiful of monkeys,' we may quote, 'is ugly in comparison with any other type.'¹³

Analogously, quantity and motion are distinguished from relations for the same reason as quality, for Plotinus wants to say that quantity as an expression of number has the same kind of being as quality, and in VI.3.21, he extends the qualification to include motion based on the idea that motion "cannot lay claim to the category of relation on the mere ground that it has an attributive and not a self-centered existence," or that simply because it is an attribute of something existent and seems dependent on that existent, this does not indicate that it can be described as a relation. Time and place, however, do become relatives, for Plotinus states that time is just the measure of motion, and space is just that which circumscribes body, and as such these categories have no independent existence. Once place is relegated to relation, situation becomes superfluous. Finally, having is easily reduced to relation, for, as Evangeliou points out, "Why is it that having shoes or arms on should make up a separate category, while having color, magnitude, a wife, a son, etc. does not?"¹⁴ Plotinus is here adopting Plato's premise in the *Sophist* that the *kath' hauto/pros allo* categorical distinction encompasses all that is—for

¹² Plotinus, *Enn.* VI.3.21, p. 512.

¹³ Plotinus, *Enn.* VI.3.11, p. 501.

¹⁴ Evangeliou, "The Plotinian Reduction of Aristotle's Categories," 154.

any particular thing exists either *kath hauto*, or, if it does not, it exists *pros allo*.

Aristotle, on the other hand, diverges from this ontology at its foundations, for he does not maintain Plato's *kath hauto* versus *pros allo* distinction from the *Sophist*. Rather than defining *pros allo* as the negative of *kath hauto*, Aristotle gives a positive definition of the latter that leaves room for an indefinite attribute—not *kath hauto* (but not necessarily *pros allo*). He defines *kath hauto* in the *Metaphysics*:

Therefore 'in virtue of itself' (*kath hauto*) must have several meanings. It applies to (1) the essence of each thing, e.g. Callias is in virtue of himself Callias and the essence of Callias; (2) whatever is present in the 'what,' e.g. Callias is in virtue of himself an animal. For 'animal' is present in the formula that defines him; Callias is a particular animal. (3) Whatever attribute a thing receives in itself directly or in one of its parts, e.g. a surface is white in virtue of itself, and a man is alive in virtue of himself; for the soul, in which life directly resides, is a part of the man. (4) That which has no cause other than itself; man has more than one cause—animal, two-footed—but man is man in virtue of himself. (5) Whatever attributes belong to a thing alone and *qua* alone; hence also that which exists separately is 'in virtue of itself.'¹⁵

There are several instances where Aristotle refers to something being not *kath auto*, but also not relative, for instance, the meanings of parts of words at *De Int.* 16a16–29 and *Poetics* 1457a31–35 and 1457a12–14, which are not significant of anything in separation, where a relata considered independently would be.

In summary, Plotinus's criticism of Aristotle's categories seems in large part determined by a Platonic ontology, which centers his five-category system around the category of relation in particular. And so my next task will be to examine Aristotle's category of relation and Plotinus's interpretation.

Aristotle's Category of Relation

According to Aristotle's discussion in *Categories* 7, a relation is a term denoting the characteristic of a thing to be referred to something outside of itself. Relations in the *Categories* include relations between "real" entities (such as the double and the half) as well as relations between a subject and an ob-

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1022a25–35, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. J. Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 2:1614. All translations of Aristotle herein, unless otherwise noted, are adapted from the Barnes edition.

ject. “The following, too, and their like, are among relatives: state, condition, perception, knowledge, position.”¹⁶ Also, “All relatives are spoken of in relation to correlatives that reciprocate,”¹⁷ for example, the double and the half, knowledge and the object of knowledge. We should note that Aristotle does not confine relation to either the subjective or the non-subjective (the mental or the extramental) realm.

Along with relation comes the question of priority, or the question of which is prior when we consider a relation between two things. Can we say that the known is known only by virtue of there existing a mind capable of knowing? In that case, a mind would be considered prior to what is known. In the *Categories*, relatives are described as things which reciprocate. One of the ways of being “prior” is that the existence of one thing implies another, whereas the existence of the second does not imply the first, as in the example of two and one—the existence of “two” implies the existence of “one.” But this is not reciprocal, and this is how we determine the priority of one over two. Aristotle introduces another example, that of the existence of a man and the statement that asserts the existence of the same man. If the man exists, the statement is true and vice versa; therefore, there is reciprocation, yet we still say that the existence of the man is prior to the truth of the statement. Relatives also reciprocate, but there remains a question of priority. It has been said that if there is knowledge, there must be something known and vice versa, and if we parallel the examples completely, it seems that knowledge depends for its existence on the known (as known).

In the *Metaphysics* Aristotle also lists three ways in which something can be called a relative:

Things are relative (1) as double to half and treble to a third, and in general that which contains something else many times to that which is contained many times in something else, and that which exceeds to that which is exceeded; (2) as that which can heat to that which can be heated, and that which can cut to that which can be cut, and in general the active to the passive; (3) as the measurable to the measure and the knowable to knowledge and the perceptible to perception.¹⁸

The question of priority with regard to the third type of relative finds a more comprehensive answer where Aristotle determines that what is think-

¹⁶ Aristotle, *Categories* 7.6b2–3, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. J. Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995), 1:11; 6b3–4 continues: “For each of these is called what it is (and not something different) of something else.”

¹⁷ Aristotle, *Categories* 7.6b27, p. 11.

¹⁸ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 5.15.1020b26–32, p. 1612.

able, knowable or measurable (etc.) is relative to the thought, knowledge or measure. What would seem to be a one-sided dependence of that which is thinkable on thought (etc.), is not to say that anything thinkable depends for its being on a thinking subject, but only as it is “thinkable.” Aristotle uses perception to exemplify this distinction; sight is relative to its object, but this object is real, for “seeing the seen” is redundant,¹⁹ whereas “seeing white” would not be. Thus a relative is the thing to which something else refers. The “thinkable” is that to which thought refers: “For the thinkable implies that there is thought of it, but the thought is not relative to that of which it is the thought.”²⁰ While the thinkable, perceptible, etc., depends for its being upon thinking, perception and the like, it is not true that the objects themselves do.

In general, if there were only the perceptible, there would be nothing if there were no animate beings; for there would not be sense perception. It would undoubtedly, then, be true that there would be neither perceptible objects nor perceptivity (for this is a quality of the perceiver); but it is impossible that the subjects which stimulate perception should be only in perception. For perception itself is surely not of itself, but there is something else besides the perception; for what moves is prior in nature to what is moved, and even if these are correlatives, this is no less the case.²¹

To say that what is thinkable, what is perceivable, becomes so only in the presence of a thinking and perceiving subject would lend to the theory that these are only properties we have attributed to objects, as those thinking and perceiving subjects. But when we think of things that can be perceived, we attribute their perceptibility not to our own perception, but also to the properties in the thing that render them perceptible to us. We are able to perceive tangible things because our senses allow us to; this describes both our nature as well as that of the thing. That is, there is something in the thing that renders it perceptible, and it is something we have not attributed to it. In the absence of a subject, an object remains in that it continues to exist outside of perception.

We can sum up this problem by saying this: the perceptible object is real; or the object of our perception is real, as is the object of cognition.

Plotinus’s Criticism of Aristotle’s Category of Relation

The fact that Plotinus’s five-category system revolves around the existence of relations (since he approaches the problem by taking Plato’s twofold division of substance and relation and then separates out other categories only when

¹⁹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 5.15.1021b2–3, p. 1613.

²⁰ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 5.15.1021a31–32, p. 1613

²¹ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 4.5.1010b30–1011a1, p. 1596.

they fail to be subsumed under these two) might lead us to think that this is one of Aristotle's categories about which he has relatively few qualms. In the first tractate of the Sixth Ennead, Plotinus undertakes to criticize Aristotle's category of relation, particularly by expressing doubts whether any reality can be attributed to relations: in other words, whether relation is a *hypostasis*. In these sections Plotinus's considerations revolve around the question of whether relations subsist in themselves, or whether the language of relation only serves to indicate the independent qualities of two relata, if anything at all. Plotinus's ultimate conclusion is that relation is an absolute existent in the intelligible realm, but this conclusion is again so heavily dependent on Platonic premises that his treatment of relation is subject to the same general criticism which can be adduced against his entire treatment of categories; namely, that he ignores Aristotle's different ontology, and his criticism is to that extent an incomplete or misguided treatment of Aristotle. As a particular confirmation of this criticism of Plotinus's approach to the *Categories*, I will show that, without his Platonic premises, Plotinus will have no response to the Aristotelian position that relations have no independent existence beyond the relata—that is, no existence independent of the qualities or quantities taken in juxtaposition to each other.

Dirk Baltzly charges Plotinus with confusing several of the possible ways in which one might deny existence to relations. He states:

Plotinus is not able adequately to address the question of the existence of relations because he confuses the reduction of all relations to internal relations with the issue of the mind-dependence of relations. Further, he confuses reduction with elimination. Finally, he is not able to assess the prospects for such a reduction because he does not distinguish between pure and impure relational properties.²²

Plotinus does indeed seem to speak of all of these ways of reducing the status of a relation as equally damaging. Thus in VI.1.6 Plotinus employs the reductionist principle, and argues that, if two qualities or quantities are identical, the relation that subsists between them may be reduced to nothing over and above the independent qualities or quantities of the two things. It is here that Plotinus seems to equate the reductionist approach to ideas with the possible mind-dependence of relations, for if the relation is nothing over and above the two identical qualities or quantities, Plotinus assumes that whatever it is that we call the identity (i.e., the relation) is a judgment. This can be seen from his statements concerning the relations of likeness and equality. Again

²² Dirk Baltzly, "Porphyry and Plotinus on the Reality of Relations" in *Journal of Neoplatonic Studies* 6, no. 2 (1998): 68.

in considering likeness in VI.1.6, Plotinus seems to apply a straightforward reductionist principle:

But what will emerge from the relation of like to like? Nothing will emerge. Likeness is the inherence of qualitative identity; its entire content is the quality present in the two objects.²³

However, he quickly follows with remarks on equality which show application of Baltzly's "mind-dependence" principle:

From equality, similarly, nothing emerges. The relation merely presupposes the existence of a quantitative identity; ...*nothing but our judgment* comparing objects essentially independent....²⁴

In these two cases we can see two of the confusions with which Baltzly charges Plotinus. In examining quantity/quality and likeness, Plotinus seems to employ a reductionist principle, whereas in speaking about equality, he is explicit that the relation is just the recognition of identity and thus mind-dependent. In addition, he seems to be assuming that relations are either just the qualities of the independent object or the result of the comparison of said objects by the mind, which is tantamount to saying that ideas are in reality nothing at all (and thus he is also an eliminativist). Baltzly criticizes Plotinus's approach, maintaining that, if the relation is either in the mind or in the qualities of the objects, this is not equivalent to nothing:

But the reductionist need not claim that the reducibility of relations to monadic properties implies that the judgment "*a* is similar to *b*" is false. It is rather the case that it simply means "*a* is *F* and *b* is *F*." Nor would 'relation' be a meaningless term. It simply indicates that properly coordinated monadic predicates hold for each of the relata.²⁵

Plotinus, apparently answering his own reductionist criticisms, attempts to argue for the independent existence of relations, but not as Baltzly might, but through the assumption of Platonic metaphysical principles. Plotinus argues that if relations are to exist independently, they must be something over and above the qualities of the objects, and something more than mere judgments. Thus he expresses in VI.1.7 this dissatisfaction with the view that relations are meaningless: "Now if we do not mean anything by Relation but are victims of words, none of the relations mentioned can exist: Relation will be a notion void of content."²⁶ But he rejects this idea asserting later in VI.1.7 that

²³ Plotinus, *Enn.* VI.1.6, p. 448.

²⁴ Plotinus, *Enn.* VI.1.6, p. 448 (emphasis mine).

²⁵ Baltzly, "Porphyry and Plotinus on the Reality of Relations," 63.

²⁶ Plotinus, *Enn.* VI.1.7, p. 448.

relations have a reality when qualified as something existing independently of qualities or judgments:

Now one thing is double of another quite apart from our speech or thought; one thing possesses and another is possessed before we notice the fact; equals do not await our comparison but—and this applies to Quality as well as Quantity—rest upon an identity existing between the objects compared: in all the conditions in which we assert Relation the mutual relation exists over and above the objects; we perceive it as already existent; our knowledge is directed upon a thing, there to be known—a clear testimony to the relation of Relation.²⁷

But we shall see that this requires Platonic assumptions: he rejects all theories of independent existence save that of Platonic immaterial substances.

In this passage Plotinus is beginning to examine the possibility and ontological basis of the existence of relation independent of any particular instantiation in the sensible realm of the related objects. The method of the argument is to deny the reality of particular instantiations of relation among sensibles, though, as we saw above, various methods of reduction, leaving only the possibility of existence in the Platonic realm of the ideal. As an example of his method, consider VI.7.1 where he challenges the existence of particular relations by noting the effect of the coming to be, the destruction, and, in general, the alteration of the related objects, thus setting the stage to argue that if a relation has existence at all, it must be as an ideal form. Thus he says:

In these circumstances we can no longer put the question of its existence. We have simply to distinguish: sometimes the relation subsists while the objects remain unaltered and even apart; sometimes it depends upon their combination; sometimes, while they remain unchanged, the relation utterly ceases, or, as happens with right and near, becomes different. These are the facts which chiefly account for the notion that Relation has no reality in such circumstances.²⁸

Thus in general, if a change to circumstance brings about the destruction of a relation, though the objects may undergo no substantial change, Plotinus takes this as evidence that the reality of a relation is at least suspect. (Consider, for instance, the relation of two objects in relative situation, e.g., right and left. The relation itself will come into being or be destroyed with no substantial change to the objects; I can destroy the relation by looking at them from

²⁷ Plotinus, *Emm.* VI.1.7, p. 448.

²⁸ Plotinus, *Emm.* VI.1.7, p. 448–49.

a different angle.) But here Plotinus is speaking of particular instantiations of relations. It is after this point that Plotinus seems to make a slippery move. While he seems here to be limiting his discussion to relations present in the sensible realm, Plotinus indicates that the relation itself is nothing material, stating in VI.1.8 that, “Now the common principle in question cannot be a body. The only alternative is that, if it does exist, it be something bodiless, either in the objects thus brought together or outside of them.”²⁹ But, as we have seen above, the reality of the material world is secondary to the intelligible realm, and Plotinus uses this definition of reality to move from asserting that relations are immaterial to the assertion that they are ideal forms, the reality of which is certainly assured. This he does in VI.1.9:

If Reality implied embodiment, we should indeed be forced to deny Reality to these conditions called relative; if however we accord the pre-eminent place to the unembodied and to the Reason-Principles, and at the same time maintain that relations are Reason-Principles and participate in Ideal-Forms, we are bound to seek their causes in that higher sphere. Doubtless, it is clear, is the cause of a thing being double, and from it is derived half-ness.³⁰

What Plotinus has done is to take examples of relations existing between sensible objects, assert the immateriality of the relation itself in these particulars, inserted the equation of immateriality to a participation in ideal forms, and concluded that the reality of relations is a Platonic Idea.

The confusion present here is the equation of immateriality to participation in ideal forms. In short, by placing the qualifications that he does on our ability to define a relation as real, and by asserting a higher reality of an intelligible realm, Plotinus has eliminated certain ways in which we might assert a relation to be real, and in particular, real instantiation among sensibles. Plotinus’s insistence on the reality of relations becomes entirely dependent on maintaining a Platonic ontology. This is exactly how Plotinus is hampered by his Platonism.

Redeeming Aristotle’s Relations

Plotinus’s characterization of a relation as a reason-principle in the realm of Ideal Forms excludes examples of relations present in Aristotle’s discussion of them as being real relations, for Aristotle maintains no such claim that *all* relatives embody an ideal reason-principle. The reality of relations is

²⁹ Plotinus, *Enn.* VI.1.8, p. 449.

³⁰ Plotinus, *Enn.* VI.1.9, p. 450.

questionable, according to Plotinus, because of their liability to come into being and disappear not in virtue of themselves, but dependently on the current circumstances of some relata, as quoted from VI.1.7. From this he determines that the reality of a relation cannot be dependent on its being embodied; however, there do seem to be relations that depend exactly on being embodied. Plotinus cites, for instance, the familial relation of father to son at the end of the same section.

It is another question whether they endure simultaneously. Take the case of father and son, and such relationships; the father dies, but the other is still his son, and so with brothers. Moreover, we see likeness where one of the like people is dead.³¹

From this passage we might conservatively conclude that Plotinus allows for relations to persist where one of the relata changes, and we might attempt to differentiate being dead from ceasing to exist. But the question is not answered here. The father-son relation is addressed again in VI.1.8; here Plotinus seems to come to a resolution on the problem of the familial relation, interpreting it as analogous to the relation between producer and produced:

Or perhaps all distinctions may be reduced to that between producer and product, where the product merely gives a name to the producer of its actuality: an example of this is the relation of father to son, though here both producer and product have a sort of actuality, which we call life.³²

On this conception, the relation does not seem to have to persist at all, as long as one of the relata imparts some quality on the other. However, the other relations which Plotinus had mentioned in the previous section, particularly the relation between brothers, does not entail any production. If Plotinus means to redeem the relation of father to son as having some real existence, then this would seem to depend on his conceiving of the relation as a lasting one, where the relation depends on the quality which is imparted, namely life. And so it would seem that a son can have a father as long as the son is alive. In the case of brothers, however, nothing is imparted. The relation would have to be defined, therefore, by their having been imparted life by a mutual third party. However, if the relation itself is then to be thought of as depending on that mutual third party, we might think that it would cease to exist were that third party to be destroyed (by death). It is possible on this conception that brothers might cease to be brothers upon their father's death. But this is an unfair interpretation of Plotinus. He instead differenti-

³¹ Plotinus, *Emm.* VI.1.7, p. 449.

³² Plotinus, *Emm.* VI.1.8, p. 450.

ates between productive and non-productive relations, ascribing a different sense of reality to each:

We must in this case recognise that in our distinction between productive and non-productive relations we are overlooking the equivocation involved in making the terms cover both action and passion, as though these two were one, and ignoring the fact that production takes a different form in the two correlatives.³³

According to Plotinus then, the relation of producer to product does not need to persist after the destruction of one of the relata in order to be thought of as real, for the relation is embodied in the actor and patient in different ways. Aristotle's conception of the action-passion relation, on the other hand, does not need even this present embodiment, for it does not require a disembodied, immaterial reason-principle on which to ground its reality. According to both authors, there is a relation; however, Plotinus's considerations of how the relation persists falters due to his assumption that the relation persists as long as does an ideal reason-principle. All he has done here is to distinguish between the reason-principles in the action and the passion. Aristotle's explanation, on the other hand, requires no subsisting reason-principle to explain the temporal nature of some relations.

Plotinus's question of whether the father-son relation persists after the death of the father simply disappears if the relation is characterized as a relation between action and passion in the way Aristotle defines it. For Aristotle also defines the action-passion relation with respect to the actualization of two capacities; in this particular example, if we retain Plotinus's assertion that what is produced is life, those capacities would be the potential to produce life, and the potential for something to be alive. But as Aristotle describes the father-son relation, the action and passion are described in the past tense. In *Metaphysics* 5.15, Aristotle describes the temporality ascribed to particular action-passion relations as follows:

Of relations which imply capacity some further imply particular periods of time, e.g. that which has made is relative to that which has been made and that which will make to that which will be made. For it is in this way that a father is called father *of his son*; for the one has acted, and the other has been acted on in a certain way.³⁴

The relation between father and son, on this account, depends on there having taken place at some point in the past some actualization of capacity. But that the relation seems to continue to persist does not depend on the con-

³³ Plotinus, *Enn.* VI.1.8, p. 450.

³⁴ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1051a20–24.

tinued existence of the relata, but on the necessary truth that the production did at some point take place. The relation of the cut to that which cuts, for instance, persists only as the necessary truth that what was cut *was cut* by that particular thing, and does not disappear if I were to destroy the cutting implement. It does not make sense to demand eternity of the form of the actualizations, or of the relation by which any capacity was actualized. The temporal nature of these relations, for Aristotle, seems to consist entirely in the recognition that something of what has happened remains evident in what persists.

The difference between productive and unproductive relations, for Aristotle, seems to have less to do with the fact that in productive relations the capacities actualized are different, and more to do with the fact that in the case of unproductive relations, the relation is that additional quality over and above the individual qualities of independent objects such that they are in relation *X* to some *Y*, whereas in productive relations we might only say that they have some temporal dimension in so far as the continued evidence of some past action is apparent (so-and-so *fathered* a son). If we consider brothers instead, then the relation is said to subsist as long as it is evident that that two men were at one time fathered by one and the same man.

The main distinction, then, between Plotinus's relations and Aristotle's relations, is that in all cases Plotinus wants to maintain that a relation exists owing to its participation in an ideal reason-principle, in all of the various examples of relation, though the kind of reason-principle, he admits, may vary, where Aristotle does not. For Plotinus, there may be no single genus of these reason-principles, for their difference in form would preclude it, but yet all relations must be explained by some reason-principle:

Now if the condition of being related is regarded as a Form having a generic unity, Relation must be allowed to be a single genus owing its reality to a Reason-Principle involved in all instances. If however the Reason-Principles [governing the correlatives] stand opposed and have the differences to which we have referred, there may perhaps not be a single genus, but this will not prevent all relatives being expressed in terms of a certain likeness and falling under a single category.³⁵

Aristotle, on the other hand, defines only one kind of relation as requiring a third thing, those relations which reference number; number being the thing to which they are related (as in equality, identity, etc.): "All these relations are numerically expressed and are determinations of number, and so in another way are the equal and the like and the same, for all refer to unity."³⁶

³⁵ Plotinus, *Enn.* VI.1.9, p. 451.

³⁶ Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1021a8–10.

These relations differ from action-passion relations because their exemplars indifferently express a relation between numbers already given, and do not indicate any actualization. In addition, Aristotle describes asymmetrical relations, whereby one thing is called relative when it is related to something else, but where that thing is not itself relative, e.g., the seen is relative to sight; however, sight would exist without that particular thing being seen. Aristotle consistently speaks of why things are *called* relative, and additionally admits of the possibility that things are relative accidentally. In the sub-types of relation, therefore, it seems that Aristotle's account is the superior one, for it does not hold too strongly to the idea that all relations must exemplify an ideal reason-principle, and therefore does not run into the same difficulty as Plotinus does when attempting to account for the seeming temporal persistence of certain relations.

In the case of productive relations it is most obvious that Aristotle's conception of relation escapes the difficulties Plotinus runs into by assuming that relations are a sort of independently existing reason-principle. Plotinus, in questioning whether the son continues to be a son once the father is dead, is making a criticism of a question Aristotle already answered when he discussed the problem of priority with regard to relations. The priority of the father to the son is to be considered as a key aspect of the relation, as the producer to the produced, or the object to what is perceived; however, on Aristotle's account, the father-son relation may persist in the absence of the father's being materially instantiated, not because of participation in an ideal reason-principle, but precisely because these relata are determinations of things that exist; it is not "the father" that produces a son, but "a man," who becomes a father by actualizing the capacity to produce and is called a father in virtue of that capacity having been actualized at some point in the past. Whereas on Plotinus's account the son remains a son by participating in a reason-principle (embodied in the man in a different way than that in which a reason-principle is embodied in the father), the Aristotelian account need only recognize the past action of production, where a quality has been imparted that persists as a relative property, as opposed to participation in a reason-principle.

Conclusion

I have argued above that Plotinus's fundamental assumption that reality belongs first and foremost to an intelligible realm determines his criticism of the *Categories* as a whole. With particular regard to the category of relation, Plotinus's definition of reality, based on this assumption, causes him to dismiss otherwise plausible claims regarding the reality of relations and makes

his categorical system vulnerable to contradiction by any who do not maintain the same foundational claim that equates reality with a higher realm of being than the sensible. This is particularly evident when he equates immaterial being with participation in Platonic forms. When we consider the distinctions of relations that both Plotinus and Aristotle make, Plotinus runs into difficulty attempting to explain the appearance and disappearance of ideal reason-principles, specifically with regard to relations between action and passion. Aristotle's account of action-passion relations, on the other hand, depends only on the necessary truth of there having taken place an actualization of a potential, one thing by another thing, the relation between which we only *attribute* subsistence as long as some indication of that having taken place is still evident. It is difficult, with Plotinus's metaphysical assumptions, to explain the mechanism by which relations as reason-principles come into being and are destroyed; but without these metaphysical assumptions, the problem disappears.

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